

T-D

2/26/76

Mineral King Project Size Scaled Down

By DOUG HOAGLAND
Times-Delta Staff Writer

Reduced peak capacity and less expensive access to the proposed development at Mineral King are the major thrusts of the Forest Service's final environmental impact statement (EIS) on the long-delayed project.

The long-awaited document was issued today and opens the way for renewed battle between the Forest Service and the Sierra Club over the development of the \$60 million high-Sierra resort complex by Walt Disney Productions Inc.

The Forest Service has reduced the total capacity of visitors from its original estimate of 10,000 year-around to 8,000 during the winter and 6,000 during the summer.

These figures represent a reduction of 20 per cent in the winter and 40 per cent in the summer from the capacity proposed in the draft EIS issued in December, 1974.

The reduced peak capacity limit is

expected to reduce use from 2,035,000 visitor days to 2,785,000. Visitor days are calculated on the presence of one or more persons on national forest lands for a total of 12 hours.

The latest proposal also lowered the capacity of visitors in areas outside the Mineral King Village. Originally set at 4,000, that capacity limit has been reduced to 2,500.

Construction of a two-lane road from Hammond, just east of Three Rivers, to Faculty Flat, also is proposed in the report.

Electric buses would shuttle visitors from there to the Mineral King Village. The highway replaces the original proposal that a cog railway be built from Oak Grove to Mineral King Village. The estimated cost of constructing the 13.3 miles of railway was \$53.8 million. Construction costs on the highway have been set at between \$18 million and \$21 million.

Under the latest proposal, facilities at

(Please see Page 5-A, Col. 1)

(Continued from Page 1-A)

Faculty Flat (1½ miles west of the village) include a parking structure for up to 2,200 cars, a bus station, lodging for 1,000 guests and day-skier facilities for a maximum of 3,500 people. The facilities would cover a 30-acre site.

Facilities at Mineral King Village, located at the junction of Morjarch Creek and the Kaweah River, would include "modestly priced to luxury units" and could accommodate up to 2,500 visitors. The Mineral King Village facilities would cover 20 acres.

Silver City would have overnight accommodations for up to 1,000 guests, employe housing, parking area and maintenance facilities. It would occupy 10 acres.

In outlining the EIS to the Times-Delta, Peter Wyckoff, a recreation land staff officer for the Forest Service, said the elimination of the cog railway would open the development to a greater number of persons.

"The \$4 to \$5 charge just to get in would have been really tough on the middle-income guest and would have been out of the question for lower-income people," he said.

Wyckoff said Disney officials did receive an advance copy of the EIS and that their reaction had been favorable.

"Generally they felt comfortable with it," Wyckoff said. He predicted the company would issue a detailed response to the document in the near future.

Expected court action is seen as taking two years, with construction taking two to three years.

In light of the reduced capacity limit, the latest EIS recommends fewer support recreation facilities. The number of campsites was reduced from 264 to 106 and will be located in five campgrounds rather than six.

The number of campers these facilities would be able to accommodate was cut almost in half — from 1,325 to 625.

An additional 25 miles of trails would be constructed. This compares to 15 miles which was recommended in the 1974 EIS.

The proposed number of ski lifts remains at 18. Earlier it had been an-

nounced that the Forest Service would recommend that the number be reduced to between six and nine lifts.

Wyckoff explained that three of the lifts will be used to transport skiers to areas where chair lifts would move them to the slopes. The access lifts will either be of the gondola or tram variety, Wyckoff said, and will be functional for sight seeing purposes during the summer.

Skilling facilities will be developed, as originally proposed, on the south side of the valley.

The final EIS states that the project is not expected to have an impact on regional climate, but it did indicate that development may modify slightly the temperature and wind patterns.

Although the report indicated that the total number of autos in the southern San Joaquin Valley is expected to double because of the development, vehicle emissions are "not expected" to be significantly altered.

This fact was attributed to low and restrictive emission standards which will be in effect by 1985, and that peak traffic is projected to occur during the periods of greatest air mixing.

Impact upon most of the animals in the affected area also is not considered significant, according to the EIS.

The legal status of the Sequoia National Game Refuge would not be changed.

The final EIS estimates that Mineral King will generate the equivalent of 600 full-time jobs and an additional 200 part-time and seasonal positions.

An additional 300 persons will be employed in spin-off businesses, which will be located primarily in Three Rivers. The report said the total number of new jobs will represent a one per cent increase in Tulare County's total employment and a far greater increase in Three Rivers.

Unemployment in Tulare County will be affected both "positively and negatively" according to the report. The jobless rate may rise slightly at the end of the winter and summer seasons as seasonal employees lose their positions,

according to the EIS. But, because the number of seasonal workers would be relatively small the impact is not considered significant.

Moreover, the EIS concludes that Tulare County's economy would be "diversified and strengthened" by the development of Mineral King.

"This increase in basic employment is in recreation and tourism, rather than agriculture and manufacturing, which represents diversification of the present economic base," the report stated.

Other projected socio-economic changes as a result of the development include:

— Doubling of the population of Three Rivers by 1990.

— Construction of 140 housing units in the Mineral King Valley and 360 in the Three Rivers area. These homes would be used by permanent employes and their families.

— Inflation of housing stock in the Three Rivers area during the late 1970s and early 1980s. The inflation is expected to result from the lag between the opening of job opportunities and the development of adequate housing.

— An increase of \$3,000,000 in the assessed valuation in Three Rivers. This would represent a 72 per cent increase in assessed valuation in the Three Rivers Union Elementary School District.

— An increase of \$24,750,000 in the county's assessed valuation.

The EIS has projected that the cost to Tulare County with the full development of Mineral King would amount to \$1,002,000 a year. The greatest expenses would be incurred by the sheriff's department, \$500,000; and for fire protection, \$400,000.

The total revenue which the county would collect because of the development would range from \$2,272,000 to \$2,425,000 annually. The largest chunk of the monies — \$1,089,000 — would result from transient occupancy taxes. Such taxes are levied on hotel and motel guests. Funds from projected sales tax increases would bring the county between \$195,000 and \$348,000 annually, the EIS estimates.